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ABSTRACT

Grammar study needs to be functional. Learners need to have a sense of how knowledge of grammar can help them communicate more effectively, both orally and in writing. The focus of grammar instruction is shifting from repetition and rote drills, memorizing parts of speech, and diagramming to develop an awareness of language in general and how it varies and changes. This topical bibliography and commentary outlines a number of strategies educators can use with students that incorporate the learning of grammar concepts into a language arts curriculum that develops the functional composing and comprehending abilities of the students. The bibliography/commentary discusses word study in grammar instruction, grammar instruction in authentic contexts, and grammar instruction revisited. It notes that current research in education indicates that effective grammar instruction emphasizes integrating the study of spelling, grammar, and meaning into a curriculum in which reading and writing are central. Lists 3 Internet resources and 4 references. (NKA)

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Introduction

In order to be successful, grammar study needs to be functional. Learners need to have a sense of how knowledge of grammar can help them communicate more effectively, both orally and in writing. The focus of grammar instruction is shifting from repetition and rote drills, memorizing parts of speech, and diagramming to developing an awareness of language in general and how it varies and changes. Following are a number of strategies educators offer that incorporate the learning of grammar concepts into a language arts curriculum that develops the functional composing and comprehending abilities of the students.

Word Study

Current research tends to support the conclusion that viewing knowledge of grammar as separate from writing, reading, and appreciation and comprehension of literature is shortsighted and incomplete. One strategy that provides a framework for teaching spelling, vocabulary, and grammar instruction in the language arts curriculum is word study. Invernizzi, Abouzeid, and Bloodgood (1997) explored the relationship of spelling to word meaning and grammar and they describe how word study techniques can enhance learners' understanding of these relationships. Word study is defined as a method that involves learners grouping words into categories of similarity and difference. Students "categorize words according to spelling, meaning, and use patterns in order to better understand how spelling represents a word's meaning and grammatical function" (p. 185). The authors stress that it is important to structure word study activities according to students' orthography awareness.

A word study in an integrated language arts/social studies unit is presented for upper elementary levels whose purpose is to build students' awareness of spelling-meaning and spelling-grammar connections. The authors describe how a fifth grade social studies unit may be integrated with the study of the role of unaccented syllables in determining a word's grammatical function and meaning. For example, the Civil War may be studied by reading the traditional social studies text along with children's literature about the war, both fiction and nonfiction. Within a literature-based unit, words from such texts can be analyzed for their form and function while enhancing learner understanding of the Civil War. The following words are sorted by meaning, known as a *concept sort*.

commander	traitor	tormentor	honor
officer	deserter	captor	favor
drummer	prisoner	victor	anger

As a prereading vocabulary exercise, teachers might ask such questions as:

- What do *commander*, *officer*, and *drummer* have in common?
- How are they related to military characters we have studied?
- How are a *traitor* and *deserter* alike?
- Are all deserters traitors? (pp. 186-187)

After discussion, students write the words in a notebook, to be added to as they read.

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After sorting a list of words by meaning, the same words can be reorganized into categories that reflect the spelling patterns of the unaccented final syllable. Words are grouped according to the *-er* or *-or* ending, with words spelled with *-ar* added for additional contrast, such as *cellar, peculiar, spectacular.* In doing this activity, learners come to see that *-er* is the most common spelling, and that *-ar* endings frequently indicate descriptive adjectives.

As the students find additional words in their texts ending in *-er,-or,* and *-or,* other spelling-grammar connections may be observed. Comparative adjectives as well as many concrete nouns end in *-er,* while abstract nouns end in *-or.* (p. 187)

Word study that focuses on spelling-meaning and spelling-grammar connections help students expand their vocabulary, develop an awareness of how word choice affects reading and writing, and strengthens orthography.

The word study exercises used in the Civil War unit dealt primarily with unaccented final syllables since students commonly misspell these words at the upper elementary stage of spelling development. Other word features appropriate for study by intermediate readers and writers include syllable structures, which might include a comparison of base words with the inflected spellings, as well as classifications by sound, pattern, and part of speech.

Rationale for Using Word Study in Grammar Instruction

Invernizzi et al. (1997) offer three reasons for including a word study approach in grammar instruction:

1. Theoretical Integrity: Word study is based on extensive research of children's development of word knowledge as they learn to read and write. Word study makes explicit how spelling patterns and word structure reflect meaning and use.

2. Fundamental Cognitive Process: Word study imitates this basic learning process of comparing and contrasting categories of word features. Repeated word sorting requires students to discriminate and make critical judgments about spelling patterns, word structures, word meaning and use.

3. Student-Centered Learning: The content of word study instruction differs based on what students are currently studying in spelling. Orthography is addressed within the context of a meaningful, reading-based vocabulary. Word study authentically integrates word-level skills using the words actually read and written by the students. While teachers focus attention on particular areas of language arts study, students make decisions about language form and function, analyzing and categorizing the words they read. (pp.190-191)

Grammar Instruction in Authentic Contexts

Many educators today maintain that an overemphasis on traditional grammar exercises trains students to read and write parts of language rather developing in them the skills necessary for functional composing and comprehending. Barnitz (1998) states that an awareness and knowledge of grammar is necessary for producing "edited, formal American English", (p. 609) but that studying how language works should have a supportive, not dominant, role in teaching reading and writing:

> Teaching about traditional grammatical concepts does not significantly influence growth in reading and writing...Too much instruction on syntactic forms can be counterproductive to the acquisition of functional composing and comprehending... Too much classroom time spent on grammatical analysis is time not spent on writing and reading natural discourse of authentic texts, so necessary for literacy abilities and literate language skills to be acquired. (p. 610)

Grammar instruction has its place as long as there is ample classroom time for reading and writing authentic, challenging texts. Barnitz (1998) offers several strategies for developing students' syntactic abilities using authentic texts:

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- *Use authentic texts and keep the literacy process whole.*

  Children develop syntactic structures as book experience increases, which has a positive effect on their reading and writing performance. Syntactic abilities are enhanced by reading and listening to stories, participating in readings, writing stories that model sentence patterns, and dialogue journals. Another strategy is "sentence collecting," in which students collect sentences interesting to them in meaning, function, or structure.

  Sentence structure skills are learned in the context of the writing and reading process, especially through revising and editing drafts. Conferences and mini-lessons support the literacy process. Teachers can use the conference to ask questions about sentence meaning and structure.

  In-process questioning can help learners construct meaning for the texts they are comprehending or composing. Teachers can ask questions that direct children to recognize syntactic cues to meaning.

- *Manipulate sentence structures in contexts.*

  Sentence building or expansion helps readers and writers to increase sentence complexity by adding words, phrases, and clauses to simple sentences.

  Sentence combining and "de-combining" are other ways to develop sentence structure literacy and help learners navigate complex structures in any difficult text they are reading.

  The cloze procedure can also facilitate syntactic awareness for reading and writing. Readers use their prior knowledge of content and language to predict words that fit into deleted slots in texts.

- *Revise linguistic priorities.*

  Studying how language works is part of learning about how people communicate. As long as there is a relationship to functional use, grammar handbooks and workbooks have their place as reference materials or for practice in using a particular pattern that a teacher helps a learner to acquire. However, awareness of syntax is best learned in context, as it facilitates language performance. Prior knowledge is crucial to comprehension, for it overrides many potential difficulties associated with syntactically complex structures. (p. 608-610)

Grammar Instruction Revisited

One question that educators are trying to answer is, "How much stress should be placed on students understanding the eight parts of speech in traditional grammar?" Ediger's (1998) response is that too often grammar has emphasized the teaching of rules without learners perceiving how grammar can help to communicate more effectively both orally and in writing. Effective grammar instruction proceeds from the concrete to the semi-concrete in the language arts curriculum; then abstract concepts can be introduced. For example, a teacher can use concrete materials to teach students the meaning of a noun. A word like *dog* can be represented by what is real. The child can see the dog. When more convenient, the teacher can substitute the semi-concrete for the concrete, offering a picture or photo for the noun. Next, the abstract phase of learning is emphasized with the learners seeing the words on the chalkboard. Each part of speech can be introduced in similar fashion.

Knowledgeable students also need to understand the five commonly used sentence patterns. Ediger (1998) illustrates examples as follows:

1. Marty swims; subject-predicate.
2. Joe caught the ball; subject-predicate-direct object.
3. The girl is skillful; subject-predicate-predicate adjective.
4. John is an athlete; subject-predicate-predicate noun.
5. Mother gave Julia a doll; subject-predicate-indirect object-direct object. (p. 6)

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Each of these sentences can be dramatized to provide meaning. Words can be replaced and substituted. Each sentence pattern can be identified and described. Using variety in sentence patterns eliminates sameness and monotony in writing.

Conclusion

There are many reasons for students' knowing how the English language works. Current research in education indicates that effective grammar instruction emphasizes integrating the study of spelling, grammar, and meaning into a curriculum in which reading and writing are central. A variety of strategies are available that go beyond grammar instruction focusing on memorization of rules and rote drills. Emphasis is shifted from learning rules, parts of speech, and sentence patterns in isolation to grammar study that is more functional. Language arts students learn how grammar can help them communicate more effectively both orally and in writing.

Internet Resources

* The Glossing Process as a Practical Approach to Grammar Instruction
An article from January (2003) issue of the *English Journal*, the National Council of Teachers of English
http://www.ncte.org/pdfs/subscribers-only/ej/0923-jan03/EJ0923Glossing.pdf

* Some Successful Ways of Teaching Grammar and Punctuation
From Florida TechNet, a project developed by Florida Human Resources Development, Inc.
http://www.floridatechnet.org/institute/waysgrammar.pdf

* Chapter 3 What Should We Teach? and A Theory of Teaching
From an online book: *Teaching Grammar as a Liberating Art*.
Author: Dr. Ed Vavra
http://nweb.pct.edu/homepage/staff/evavra/TGLA/TGLA03.htm

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Hagemann, J., & Wininger, M. (1999). An ideological approach to grammar pedagogy in English education courses. *English Education, 31(4)*, 265–294. [EJ587545]

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